

Teacher perceptions

of the use and value of formative assessment in secondary English programmes

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Introduction

The data underpinning this paper were gathered at a one-day in-service course for secondary English teachers held in Palmerston North in March 1999. The 20 teachers came from a wide range of schools and had similarly diverse teaching backgrounds.

The teachers spent the day discussing the significance of formative assessment in promoting effective learning. As preparation, they were asked to evaluate their own teaching and assessment practices, their school/departmental assessment policies and their marking routines.

During the day-long meeting, issues raised by Black and William (1998) were discussed. Eight questions based on those issues became the focus for individual responses by the teachers:

- What are the ways in which you understand and deal with the relationship between your formative and summative assessment roles?
- How can the predictive validity of your summative assessment compare with the external exam results of the same students?
- Marking is usually conscientious but in what ways could/should it offer guidance on how work can be improved?
- In what ways can teacher/classroom tests encourage rote and superficial learning?
- Is it typical (in secondary school assessing) that the giving of marks and the grading functions are over-emphasised, while the giving of useful advice and the learning function are under-emphasised?
- If assessment feedback seems to the students to have a “competitive” purpose (rather than a “personal improvement” purpose) can this demotivate low attainers?

- In what ways can assessment feedback seem to serve social and managerial functions, at the expense of the learning function?
- Does your school/departmental assessment policy foster the collection of marks to fill up records rather than to provide for the analysis of students’ work to discern learning needs?

As New Zealand teachers of English have become increasingly familiar with the “new” English curriculum and its achievement objectives, they have also had to become accountable, through planned teaching programmes based on the effective use of learning outcomes derived from those objectives.

In 1997, the Ministry of Education issued a support resource to schools, *Planning and Assessment in English*. It stated:

Assessment information is collected in order to:

- improve students’ learning
- report on students’ progress
- authenticate teachers’ judgements
- improve teaching and learning programmes.

These purposes are best served when both teachers and students are involved in making assessment decisions (MoE, 1997, p.59).

Here an implicit value is placed on formative assessment as a strategy for fostering learning and improving teaching programmes.

Most English teachers understand the differences between formative and summative assessment. Whether this understanding is carried through into effective teaching strategies and classroom management is less sure. There are tensions between, on the one hand, the demands and pressures on teachers to produce “good results” (in both internal and external

examinations), and on the other, their own professional judgement which asks teachers to spend more time with students, in order to ensure full understanding of new content. These tensions reflect the pressures of the new “accountability”. Against these pressures, the commitment to formative assessment can become marginalised.

Working definitions

Current assessment practices in secondary schools are designed to be competency-based, placing considerable emphasis on both the formative and summative functions of assessment. The function of assessment is not just to identify competence, but also to facilitate it.

Formative assessment is on-going throughout the learning process. Teachers use it to provide students with effective feedback, and to appraise the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies. It reduces the gap between what has been learned and what still needs to be learned. It should also look forward to the specific next step required to improve performance, perhaps through the use of alternative strategies.

Summative assessment is a summary of the learning outcomes, coming at the end of a learning process. It records and reports an achievement, indicates an acquired standard, and may bestow an award or credential.

Perception and practice – the teacher responses

The eight questions which were the focus for the teachers’ thinking about their use of formative assessment as a classroom strategy were designed to produce a tentative picture of both perception and practice. Their responses

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are summarised below. For each question, I have selected one or more quotes to highlight the spectrum of responses, followed by comment.

1. What are the ways in which you understand and deal with the relationship between your formative and summative assessment roles?

The differences between the two assessment roles were generally understood. All the teachers involved understood the respective theoretical place of each type of assessment within the teaching and learning process:

Formative (assessment) is about **pupils** actively learning and progressing and monitoring themselves. Summative is about the **teacher** monitoring pupils' progress.

Formative is included in the teaching process as opposed to the final summative assessment which is commented upon and graded.

Most of the responses revealed levels of understanding similar to those quoted. However, only a small percentage spelt out how they "dealt with" the relationship in terms of the practicalities of classroom management:

I have been dealing with formative assessment largely in the form of teacher conferencing — on an individual basis, reading through work completed so far and offering my comments and suggestions on how it could be improved. Formative assessment goes on at the draft stage of work. (Small classes enable me to employ this style.)

Formative assessment was seen as "user-friendly checkpoints linking teaching and learning", and as "encourag[ing] student involvement in learning." Summative assessment was recognised as the measuring of achievement at the end of a task. One teacher commented on the increasing use of formative assessment, within group work, through peer and self-assessment.

The tension between the realities of the classroom situation and the need for strategies which help maximise student learning was a problem recognised by all. Class size is not the only factor influencing teachers' commitment to the use of "time-consuming" strategies such as those on which formative assessment rests. Secondary school time-tabling impinges on teachers' willingness to spend time on, say, conferencing, as an aid to student learning. Highly structured curriculum delivery imposes time constraints on teachers in a way which precludes maximising formative assessment strategies throughout any particular unit of work.

2. How does the predictive validity of your summative assessments compare with the external exam results of the same students?

Teachers saw the close links between their internal school summative assessments and the external examination results relevant to the same students (in Years 11 and 13):

Because we mainly "teach to the exams".

If your summative assessments are linked to exam answer requirements, then the predictive validity is high.

There is clearly pressure to respond to the demands of "high stakes" examinations — even if it involves a mistaken belief that their own exams are a type of formative assessment.

I tend to mark hard and students tend to do better in the external exam. I use the school's internal exams as a type of formative assessment so that they can see where they need to improve for the national external exams.

In recognising the high predictive validity of their own school examination results (vis a vis external exam results), the teachers clearly indicated the influence of the external summative assessments. School exams tend to prepare students for external exams by replicating both constraints of time and scope of content mastery essential for success in the external examinations.

The internal school examinations also serve a managerial role, in that poor results can be harnessed by teachers as a "wake-up call" to students who have not achieved well.

As teachers grow in experience at teaching examination classes, they get more efficient in

"training" their students to meet these demands. The external examiners' reports on how students answered the examination questions offer further "guidelines" to successful summative assessment. As such, they are poor models for the use of formative assessment as an aid to learning.

3. Marking is usually conscientious but in what ways could/should it offer guidance on how work can be improved?

Most of the teachers recognised the value of using marking as a basis for helping students improve their work. They did this through criteria-based marking and focused commenting on student work.

A [student] strength needs to be identified before constructive suggestions for improvement are offered. These suggestions should relate to criteria already known to the student.

Comments should relate to:

1. What you like (about the student work).
2. What can be improved — restricted to one or two suggestions only, in terms that can be understood by the student.

The reality of pressures on teachers' time is also highlighted:

Should indicate what has been done well and also indicate areas to improve — with suggestions provided. Often time and opportunity preclude this, unfortunately.

The teachers' comments focused on the use of criteria, known by the students, as an aid to effective marking. They also suggested that individual conferencing is a help (if time allows), as well as stressing the need for reinforcement of learning in the classroom by means of modelling and going over weaknesses.

It was clear from discussion that many of the teachers felt guilty about marking to set criteria — they felt that other "errors" should be marked as well. They also recognised that "over-marking" can reinforce underachievement. They revealed in discussion that they do not utilise their knowledge of student strengths and weaknesses as a basis for on-going planning of their own programmes. Marking is rarely used, on a teacher/student basis, as an interactive basis for improving learning. Most mark-books reflect an excess of summative assessments throughout the year, to the detriment of recorded formative assessments which identify student learning.

4. In what ways can teacher/classroom tests encourage rote and superficial learning?

The teachers commented on a range of "diversions" away from the underlying principles of effective teaching and learning when testing

is used in a non-formative way:

When the marks are more important than the learning.

By encouraging “getting it right” rather than understanding the underlying processes involved.

Drilling them to supply finite “marker-happy” answers.

By telling students “write this down...it will be tested” — used as a discipline tool.

It is learnt — but probably not retained for more than 24 hours — because students do not see its true value — only as a means to an end — to gain a good test result.

Preparation for external examinations dominated the discussion about this question. Except for the first two years of secondary schooling (and in some schools not even at these stages) internal examinations and tests are regarded as vital preparation for the School Certificate (Year 11) and Bursary (Year 13) examinations.

Teachers mentioned that when concepts were “provided”, without meaningful contextual reference, there was no guarantee of real learning by students. Similarly, content-based teaching, again “provided” for the students, because teachers guessed it was going to be examined, did not ensure meaningful learning. If a teacher “sign-posts” the learning for examinations by clearly indicating to students that “this is what you have to say/think/do” (in order to score well), the managerial role of assessment comes to the fore.

It was clear from the discussion that even when teachers stated that their main teaching aim was to promote student understanding, their assessment practices tended to place far greater value on summative rather than formative processes. This inconsistency was not worked at by many of the teachers involved. They cited “pressures of time” and “school ethos” as reasons.

5. Is it typical that the giving of marks and the grading functions are over-emphasised, while the giving of useful advice and the learning function are under-emphasised?

Teacher responses to this question, more than to any other, reflected the tension between teaching for learning and teaching for examinations. Social, political and educational factors were raised by teachers in their responses:

Yes, because society is competitive and multi-classed, and our education system reflects this reality.

In a largely externally assessed secondary education system, grading and marks,

through tests and exams, are an expectation which the community of employers, parents and the students themselves demand. Whether this is over-emphasised is as much a political consideration as an educational one.

Yes — I believe students are more concerned with “What did I get?” rather than “What can(‘t) I do?” or “What do I need to improve?”

If a school ethos is examination-oriented and the political commitment within the school tends towards external assessment, formative assessment becomes marginalised. As one teacher stated, in schools such as this, students tend to “demand” a grade by way of evaluating their own relative class position. Useful advice tends to be ignored when marks command all the respect of students. In this situation, it is hard for teachers to convince students of the value of formative assessment.

Teachers felt that, although there is more scope in junior secondary classes (Years 9 and 10) for the use of formative approaches through peer and self-assessment, implementation depends on individual teaching philosophy.

6. If assessment feedback seems to the students to have a “competitive purpose” (rather than a “personal improvement” purpose), can this demotivate low attainers?

Teachers gave a mix of responses to this question. There is an indication of the tension teachers feel within themselves about the relative value of each of the two purposes for assessment. This question generated the most heat in discussion. It focused attention on the links that exist between student learning on the one hand, and the teaching styles, strategies, and assessment, recording and reporting techniques used by teachers on the other.

Yes, but no more than all life’s experiences tend to reinforce this (e.g. “Second place is nothing” — All Black coach).

Yes, some students who have never “succeeded” through summative assessment, tend to give up without an attempt. Everything is in the “too-hard basket”.

Low attainers can be motivated by “competitive feedback” if the task is understood and achievable, just as they can be demotivated by any form of feedback when the task is beyond them.

Yes, this must be true, but it is also true that kids need to compete among themselves and that an improved mark can be an important reward. Is removing the mark or grade the answer?

Some teachers felt that feedback based on

“competitive” assessments, usually in the form of marks or grades and comments on weaknesses, tended to foster the failure cycle — “I can’t do this”, “I’m not interested in this subject”, or “It’s too hard”. This type of feedback tended to make students focus on what they could not do, and demotivation followed.

Students who come to see themselves as unable to learn, as evidenced by their on-going, low summative assessments, usually cease to take a positive attitude towards the subject.

7. In what ways can assessment feedback seem to serve social and managerial functions, at the expense of the learning function?

This question evoked responses in which teachers considered the demands of the “paperwork” associated with the total assessment process.

There is a need to educate parents about the assessment process so they can appreciate meaningful feedback, in terms of learning outcomes achieved (by their sons/daughters).

Having the paperwork in order, looking impressive, seems to be becoming more important than the teaching/learning environment itself.

“Over-assessment” was the most common theme underpinning both the day-long discussions and the responses to this question. Teachers felt that the accountability factor was intruding, to the extent that more summative assessments were being undertaken. School examinations were becoming a powerful control

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tool which “regulated” student behaviour and the learning process. Marks were becoming over-important, together with the requirement to record the same performance information in more than one place, at more than one time! Marks were judged to be a more convenient type of comment on success — easy to understand and useful for ranking purposes.

This over-emphasis meant that considerable class time was being spent on “training” for examinations. These teachers felt that considerable time was needed to foster effective formative assessment approaches.

8. Does your school/departmental assessment policy foster the collection of marks to fill up records rather than to provide for the analysis of students’ work to discern learning needs?

The range of responses reflected the dichotomy explicit in the question:

I think there is a balance — we do require enough marks to provide an assessment each term. But the school is also concerned about discerning learning needs in order to provide extra help for those students who require it.

Yes — since the year started, more summative assessment than I ever imagined. As an HOD I’m into comments on students’ work being recorded, but I have to fight for this. It’s not in the “culture” of the school, not in the mindset of some staff.

Teacher responses indicated that, in the main, they worked to policies which attempted to address both sides of the issue raised by the question. They indicated that they worked hard to find a balance between fulfilling the school/departmental demands for the recording of summative assessments, as well as endeavouring to identify the learning needs of individual students. This seeking of a balance reflects the tension teachers work within with respect to spending time gathering and recording meaningful information about student learning and providing helpful feedback to the students at the point of learning.

Teachers who have followed professionally offered advice about “doing less (assessment) but doing it better”, have felt guilty about mark-books which look “empty” compared with some of their colleagues’ books. Extensive formative information (comments, ✓ or ✗ against criteria etc) does not seem to be as acceptable as columns of marks!

Barriers to effective practice

The views of the teachers in this study support the research evidence, cited by Black and Wiliam (1998), that the everyday practice of classroom

assessment is beset with problems and shortcomings. These arise from tensions between sound teaching practice as perceived by good teachers, and the “political” commitment of schools (and the educational system) to “high-stakes” assessment. Although many teachers are aware of the value of formative assessment, when confronted with the realities of recording and reporting summaries of student achievement in summative terms, they cannot spend sufficient time providing helpful feedback to all their students.

External tests/exams, together with school-wide testing regimes, can constrain teachers to act against their own better judgement about the best ways to develop the learning of their students. Although these tests/exams have an important role to play in securing public confidence in local schools, their undue influence on the development of effective formative assessment is a significant constraining factor with respect to sound teaching and learning.

Towards the improved use of formative assessment in English

Black and Wiliam’s summary of research about formative assessment indicates that the interactive nature of teaching and learning provides the basis for modifying both in order to meet the needs of the students better.

However, Black and Wiliam conclude that any innovation in formative assessment cannot be achieved merely by marginal changes in classroom strategies or teaching practice. All such work involves feedback between teachers and students, and among students. The nature of these interactions will be the key determinants for the outcomes of any changes.

For assessment to be formative, the feedback information has to be used by the students. This means that a significant aspect of any approach will also involve teachers considering the structure and nature of the learning tasks which will provide the best challenges for improved learning.

The role of students in formative assessment is an important aspect for fostering learning. If self and peer assessments are to become an integral part of any teacher’s assessment strategies, the motivations and self-perceptions of the students become as significant as the quality of the learning tasks and the assessment feedback inherent in the classroom approaches.

Black and Wiliam’s review revealed that teachers’ attention to formative assessment can lead to significant learning gains. Moreover, the effective use of formative assessment strategies does seem to lower the barriers to learning for less able students.

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If this is the case, it implies the use of particular classroom management strategies, greater use of certain types of teaching strategies, and particular emphases within school/departmental policies regarding the delivery of the curriculum. These implications are even more significant in teaching and learning English, because this is where most schools believe the responsibility for developing student literacy should lie.

All these factors must be related to the current climate of school-wide accountability, competition for enrolments, and community pressure on schools to perform well in the “league tables”.

In the journals reviewed by Black and Wiliam, a significant number of references to research on learning gains had, as a common feature, an enhanced use of formative assessment. Other features associated with formative assessment need to be taken into account if teachers wish to make significant changes to their classroom practices, for example:

- Increased use of feed-back between teachers and students at the time of learning.
- Active involvement of the students in the assessment of their achievement.
- Increased flexibility in the planning of teaching activities in order to adjust to the learning needs of students as they are revealed.
- Greater awareness of the degree to which the motivation and self-esteem of students can be enhanced by effective use of formative assessment.

- Increased use of peer and self-assessment as sound bases for improving learning.

The teachers involved in the discussion day referred to each of these points. The increased use of feed-back was seen as an impossibility in view of the demands of teaching large classes, the need to “cover the syllabus”, and the domination of “high-stakes” assessment with its higher status in the eyes of the school as a whole.

However, teachers did indicate that they are involving students in the assessment of their own progress. The new English curriculum, with its achievement objectives, is leading more and more teachers to focus their teaching around relevant learning outcomes. As teachers make students more aware of the criteria for assessment, they are making use of peer assessment, and to a lesser extent student self-assessment, as a basis for encouraging students to become aware of how they can improve their own work.

If teachers continue to hold the reins of assessment (as in the managerial and social functions referred to in Question 7), students take less responsibility for their own learning than they do if peer assessment, and to an even greater extent self-assessment, have a significant place in classroom procedures.

It is clear that as students’ awareness of, understanding of, and even formulation of the criteria for assessment increase, so does their understanding of the work being undertaken. In addition, greater motivation and increased student self-esteem follow the sustained use of these approaches.

Teachers commented during the day on higher work rates and less disruptive behaviour in their classes as a result. But they also hinted at a price for this — a slower pace of covering the syllabus. A sense of tension and guilt developed, particularly in schools where prescribed summative testing was scheduled across their department.

Others felt that the slowing down was short-term. They insisted that as greater student understanding took hold, speed of “coverage” increased. As one teacher put it, “I go slower, longer, in order to run faster, later”.

Promoting formative assessment

One of the four factors which Black and Wiliam noted as supportive of the increased use of formative assessment was adjusting programmes or activities to suit learning needs. This did not figure to any extent during the teachers’ discussions, nor in their written responses to the questions.

It seems that teacher perception of the value of formative assessment does not extend to

modifying pre-planned units of work, nor to the pre-determined use of certain strategies, once a unit is under way. Even if the actual unit itself is a problem for the students, or the main teaching strategy employed by the teacher does not suit all students, no major adaptation or change tends to be undertaken.

Pre-testing, class discussion aimed at eliciting prior knowledge and understanding, or planning with the class (as in Garth Boomer’s (1992) “negotiating” the curriculum) are all helpful strategies. Opportunities for students to share their evolving understanding should be built into planning.

Peer and self-assessment used throughout a unit can help to reduce the reliance on summative assessment as the sole means of monitoring and reporting on student progress. Feedback to all students should be based on the particular qualities of their work, relative to pre-set criteria, with advice on how to improve. Comparisons with other students are not necessary.

Maintaining student portfolios, with primary evidence of work in progress, and both teacher and student comment on strengths and weaknesses at the time, is an invaluable classroom management strategy which gives pride of place to formative assessment as a basis for on-going learning.

The effective use of portfolios can become the basis for recording individual student progress in a way which could contribute to half-year and end-of-year summative statements of achievement.

Portfolios help students learn by enabling them to review their achievement, take responsibility for their own learning, and take an active part in the reporting process. Specifically, portfolios contribute to formative assessment processes for the following reasons:

- maintaining portfolios incorporates the process of negotiation
- all assessments included in the portfolios will involve student/teacher and/or student/student discussion
- the cover sheets for all work involve student/teacher dialogue.

Emerging professional development needs

The discussions among and responses of the 20 secondary English teachers involved in this study showed that although there is a need for carefully planned, sustained, holistic professional development if formative assessment practices are to be effectively incorporated into classroom practice, actual classroom practice is tentative or weak.

There is no one simple way to improve formative assessment. Many of the initiatives suggested above (and implicit in the teacher responses to the eight questions) take more class time.

Classroom evaluation practices tend to encourage superficial and rote learning because there is little reflection on what is being assessed. The “grading” function (assessment *of* learning) is over-emphasised and the “learning” function (assessment *for* learning) is under-emphasised.

The evidence tends to show that the major effect of much current feedback is to teach the weaker students that they lack ability, so that they become demotivated and lose confidence in their ability to learn.

Most of the teachers involved in this study were caught in conflicts between their own beliefs in what constituted effective assessment for learning and the values, agendas and structures which were institutionalised in favour of higher-stakes summative assessment.

These effects run deep and are reflected in the fact that when teachers undertake their own assessments, they imitate, in various ways, the external summative examination testing — with little or no feedback related to ongoing learning.

A classroom culture of negotiation, questioning and focused thinking is needed. Any professional development programme should concentrate on how improvements in formative assessment can:

- Enhance the quality of teacher/student interactions within any teaching/ learning situation
- Identify and develop the strategies required by students to take active responsibility for their own learning
- Provide the particular assistance needed to move students out of the “low-attainment trap”.

Teachers need help in doing this. Only a small percentage of innovative teachers is able to pick up ideas and principles and convert them into practical classroom ideas. Most teachers, particularly when confronted with all the other pressures they face, need the support of other teachers, with whom they can identify, to provide practical answers which justify a commitment to formative assessment. Local networking, supported by external evaluators who can maintain development of the programme, could sustain dissemination over the period of time necessary to bring about such fundamental change.

Another area of concern indicating the need for specific professional development relates to the confusions and tensions, both for teachers and students, between the formative and summative purposes which their work might have to serve. If an optimum balance is not sought,

formative work will always be fragile. To be effective, a professional development strategy to improve learning needs to set clear learning outcomes, and to design and choose relevant learning tasks which will get the appropriate feedback, as well as to ensure that students are able to interpret and use that feedback.

Looking ahead

The current style of assessments in English required for National Certificate of Educational Achievement qualifications offers an excellent chance to initiate teacher development in the effective use of formative assessment. The need to prepare “drafts” of a wide range of work before final presentation for Credit, Merit or Excellence grades provides an opportunity to make use of formative assessment processes as students are “guided” (rather than “directed”) towards self-improvement.

The fundamental shifts required to give formative assessment a place in the sun will require time, for:

- effective professional development to take place;
 - relevant research into the existing relationship between the summative and formative roles faced by teachers;
 - national policy to give a lead in this direction.
- Black and Wiliam (1998) set out several important areas for further research and for professional development, based on existing sound assessment practice, in English classrooms:
- the perceptions and beliefs of English teachers about learning, about the “abilities” and prospects of their student, and about their role as assessors

- the nature of the social setting in the classroom, as created both by students and teachers and by the constraints of the wider “system” as they perceive and evaluate them
- issues relating to race and gender in relation to the use of formative assessment in the English classroom
- the nature and quality of feedback to students from formative assessment strategies of all kinds, and the ability of the students to respond to that feedback.

Notes

- 1 Ministry of Education (1994), *English in the New Zealand Curriculum*.
- 2 A full rationale for student portfolios is included in Ministry of Education (1997), *Planning and Assessment in English*, Wellington: Learning Media.

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